WASHTENAW COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY - Founded December 17, 1857

April 1989

# WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

## Ann Arbor Lyra Male Chorus: Their Songs Drew Together Town and Gown

*A toast to all who gather here,*
*That's you and you and you*
*To loyal friends and comrades dear,*
*That's you and you and you.*

*Here's happiness in pleasant ways,*
*With cloudless skies of blue,*
*And best of all a thousand friends*
*Like you and you and you.*

Those were the words with which ten members of the former Lyra Male Chorus sang a rousing welcome to the Washtenaw County Historical Society's February audience. Their founder, the late "Professor" Reuben Kempf, would have been proud.

The ten who joined their voices in song were father and son Irving and Larry Brown, James Craven, Leroy P. Gray, Don Haworth, Ron Hinterman, John C. King, Charles Lovelace, Erwin Scherdt, and Walter Strickland. (Since the program, Mr. Hinterman passed away.)

Spokesman LeRoy P. Gray then told about the former community chorus, which held its own in a community, which held its own in a community that often played host to the world's great musicians and still does.

The chorus was organized in 1880, 109 years ago, as the Beethoven *Gesangverein* or Lyra *Gesangverein* , which, translated, means "Lyra Song Fest," according to Gray.

Longtime University of Michigan President James B. Angell had asked Reuben Kempf, a local music teacher and choir director, to form a male chorus of townspeople in an attempt to foster better understanding between

*(continued)*

***Photo courtesy of Esther Warzynski.***

*Lyra Male Chorus alumni are holding the hand-embroidered banner that they displayed at their concerts. It now hangs at the Kempf House. Shown (left to right) are Erwin Scherdt, LeRoy P. Gray, Walter Strickland, James Craven, Ron Hinterman, and Larry Brown. Not visible at left is Irving Brown, whose are is holding the flag.*

## Conserving Historic Papers Will Be James Craven's Topic

Almost anyone who has saved a newspaper clipping for a few years knows how quickly it turns yellow and brittle. Conserving paper and books in our nation's historical archives and libraries is a special art.

James W. Craven, book and paper conservator at the U-M's Bentley Historical Library, will talk about his work at the Washtenaw County Historical Society meeting on Sunday, April 16, 2 p.m., at the Bentley Library.

The library is located at 1150 Beal on the U-M North Campus near Veterans' Hospital. The meeting is open to the public free of charge. Free parking is available Sundays across the street and limited parking, by the library.

Incidentally, Craven, who has worked at Bentley for a number of years, was a former member of the former Lyra Male Chorus and was one of the ten chorus alumni who sang at the February meeting.

### Certificates Offered

Hand-lettered certificates are offered free of charge, framed if desired, by WCHS to organizations for milestone anniversaries. For more information, call 663-8826. If readers know of such anniversaries coming up, please let us know.

# News Briefs

## WCHS Tour to Visit New State Museum

Michigan's brand-new historical museum in Lansing will be the destination of the WCHS Annual Bus Tour on Saturday, June 10.

The museum, which has been under construction since 1985, is part of a new Michigan Library and Historical Center located about two blocks southwest of the Capitol. The grand opening was held in March.

## Salem Church Given 100-Year Certificate

President Patrick Owen presented a WCHS Centennial Certificate to Salem Bible Church, 9481 Six Mile Road, Salem, on February 12 in honor of the 100th anniversary of the church building.

The building is the home of the earliest township congregation, which dates back to the early 1830s. It was founded as the First Baptist Church, which erected the present building in 1888, and later became known as the Salem Federated Church before adopting the present name.

## Annual Potluck Set at Dixboro Church

The WCHS Annual Potluck Dinner meeting will be held on Wednesday, May 17, 6:30 p.m., at the Dixboro Methodist Church Fellowship Hall, same as last year.

## Plastering, Hardware—Old House Topics

"Plastering" and "Fixtures and Hardware" will be the topics of the next two Second Sunday Old House Clinics sponsored by the Ann Arbor Area Preservation Alliance.

Don Hoffman, who has been in the plastering business for 33 years, will speak at the Leslie Science Center, 1831 Traver Road, on April 9, 2 p.m.

Reynold Low, founder and owner of Materials Unlimited (an architectural salvage firm) will speak at his business (2 West Michigan Avenue, Ypsilanti) on May 14, 2 p.m.

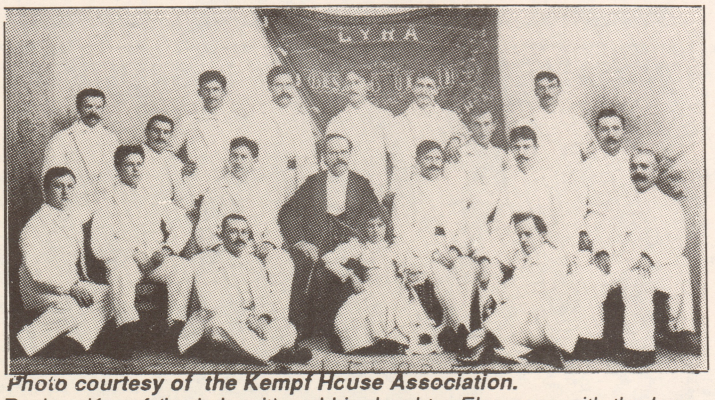


***Photo courtesy of the Kempf House Association.***

*Reuben Kempf (in dark suit) and his daughter Elaa pose with the Lyra Gesangverein circa 1893. Members of the chorus, which disbanded in 1968, came from all walks of life in the community.*

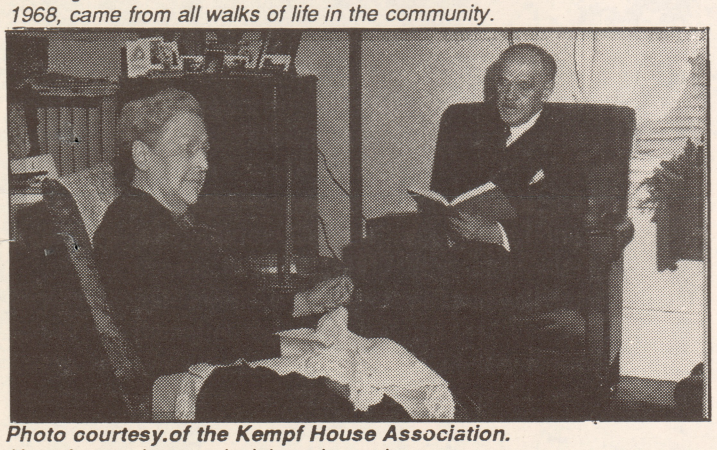

***Photo courtesy.of the Kempf House Association.***

*Kempfs—not just provincial music teachers.*

the "town and gown."

"Town" meant Ann Arbor residents (a goodly percentage of whom were German), and "gown," the University faculty (referring to their formal academic robes).

In 1890, Reuben Kempf and his wife Pauline Widenmann Kempf bought the little Green Revival-style house at 312 South Division Street for their home and music studio. (Now city-owned and known as the Kempf House Center for Local History, it has been largely restored to the way the Kempfs had it.)

The chorus first met on the third floor over the former DeFries Art Shop, at the northwest corner of Main and Liberty Streets, where the Kempfs made their home before moving to Division Street.

Mainly German songs were sung in early programs. At the close of each program, the chorus sang the U-M's *The Yellow and the Blue* with a German accent. "That really brought down the house," Gray said.

The chorus participated in many out-of-town events, including a singing contest in Bay City where they won first prize.

Gray talked about the Chorus:

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"Wives of men in the original chorus made the banner which our group always displayed at our annual spring concerts. [The banner, which now hangs at Kempf House, was on display at the WCHS meeting.] I found out each woman embroidered one letter. The first letter was embroidered by Mrs. Simon Dieterle, the former Amerlia Gwinner, whose husband and brother were members of the chorus.

"Originally, the letters were done in gold on blue but, for preservation purposes, it was done over with blue letters on gold," Gray continued. The blue silk background on the back (original) side is in tatters.

"I became a member of the chorus in 1939 through an invitation from the late Carl Anderson. The first meeting I had with Professor Kempf was at a Lyra Chorus meeting. I sat through the session and was auditioned afterwards.

"Professor Kempf asked me what part I sang. I told him I was a baritone. After going through the scales, arpeggios, and warm-ups, he turned to me and said 'You're not a baritone, you're a lazy tenor , but I want you to come to my house and have my wife work with you.'

"Thus, began a wonderful opportunity for two years to study under Pauline Kempf at Kempf House, known by many as the 'little school of music on Division Street.'

"I never returned until the dedication last September 25 [of a State historic marker there]. The music room was intact with the grand piano and mirror that her pupils used to sing in front of. The Lyra Chorus alumni group sang at this event.

"Pauline Kempf was a voice coach for many of the visiting artists that appeared at Hill Auditorium, including Madame Schumann-Heink. When they

came to Ann Arbor to perform, many stopped at Kempf House to prepare themselves.

"Professor Kempf was an excellent musician and teacher. He was very kind and a warm person, but he was a perfectionist. In later years, he had a hearing loss, but he certainly was not tone- deaf.

"At some of our rehearsals, we'd work on one number all evening long, thinking we had it down pat. That's what we thought. He would say, 'The next time we meet, we're going to work on it again.'

"Many changes have taken place since the formation of this group over a century ago. The later male chorus abandoned German songs as its chief entertainment and included a repertoire of show tunes, secular, religious, and classical selections.

"The chorus had a music library of several hundred numbers of all sorts, including the complete works of present-day show tunes and the more modern renditions by today's composers and arrangers, as well as classics for choral groups.

"The Lyra Chorus was a member of the Michigan Association of Choruses and the Associated Male Choruses of America. Each year at a principal city, the member groups presented a concert.

"Can you imagine the sound and volume of an aggregation of 700 male voices on stage at one time singing the selected repertoire for the season?

"Ann Arborites were presented such a concert in Hill Auditorium on May 22, 1954. It drew 20 choruses from Michigan and Canada with the Lyra Chorus as host, and we packed them in.

"Later on, the chorus was sponsored by the Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation Department and as a part of the evening school. We met every Monday evening, competing in volume with the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, which rehearsed in the next room.

"Nevertheless, we remained good friends and stayed on key.

"Actually, the Lyra group had only five permanent conductors, namely, the late Professor Kempf, Charles L. Taylor, John Merrill, Harliss Wilson, and Ed Banghart.

"Taylor was a former RCA distributor, choral director, and tenor. Merrill, of the Pioneer High School Music Department, later became secretary of the National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan. Wilson and Banghart were of the public school music department.

"When there was need, Lester McCoy from the Choral Union, would give us a hand—also, Erwin Scherdt.

"From the Lyra Chorus, there branched out many quartets to sing at functions in the city and elsewhere when it was felt the entire group would outnumber the audience. Normally, there were 45-50 members.

"The Lyra Chorus was self-supporting. Our main project was our annual spring concert, which was given to raise funds to provide voice scholarships to the National Music Camp.

"In 1949, one of our first recipients was James Craven, who joined the chorus in 1950. Forty years later, that same James Craven is singing with us this afternoon.

"We played to packed houses in our spring concerts. We had to fill the auditorium to meet expenses. The admission at that time was a dollar for adults and fifty cents for children.

"It took at least seven months to prepare for our spring concerts. A total of between 30 and 40 new numbers had to be learned and memorized.

"It was a difficult task, but we got through it because we were a group that liked to sing for the enjoyment of singing.

"In addition to the spring concert, the chorus sang for many community functions, including welcoming dignitaries. [One of those was welcoming a group from Tuebingen, Germany, Ann Arbor's sister city.]

"We were going to introduce ourselves in German. I had sung in a German choir and so had Erv. I wasn't too well up on German, but I could have worked something out.

"But, I'm glad I held back because when these kids introduced themselves, it was in *perfect* English.

"The main objective of the chorus was to promote and foster good music among the young set. Our competition among high school students for voice scholarships to Interlochen was our first priority.

"Dr. Joseph Maddy, founder of Interlochen, was one of our early scholarship judges in addition to Lester McCoy

## Kempfs: not just provincial music teachers

The musical Kempfs of Kempf House were not just provincial music teachers.

Reuben was born in 1859 to a pioneer German family on Waters Road near the present Briarwood Shopping Center. At 17, he was sent to Basel, Switzerland, to study for the Lutheran ministry. He was more interested in music and transferred to the Royal Conservatory in Stuttgart. His classmates there included Victor Herbert.

After graduation in 1879, he returned to Ann Arbor and began his long musical career. He continued to be active in music to within a few weeks of his death at the age of 86 in 1945.

He was active in the University Glee Club and served for 33 years (1895-1928) as organist and choir director of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church.

His wife, the former Pauline Widenmann of Ann Arbor, graduated from the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and studied under a celebrated voice coach, Oscar Saenger, in New York.

She was an accomplished contralto, who conducted the First Congregational Church Choir and taught hundreds of local children and U-M students.

Mrs. Kempf died in 1953 at the age of 93. She was still teaching private pupils at the age of 85.

Their guests at Kempf House included Madame Schumann-Heink, Victor Herbert, and Germany's last crown prince, Louis Ferdinand von Presussen, son of the Kaiser.

### "What Is It" Game Available to Schools

WCHS offers a traveling exhibit to schools of small artifacts set up as a humorous "What is it" game for children and another one for adults.

The exhibits are available for classes and meetings, subject to time and volunteer availability. For information, call Karen O'Neal, Traveling Exhibit Committee Chairperson, 665-2242.

and Maynard Klein.

"What was necessary to become a member of Lyra Chorus? The most important requirement was that a person must enjoy singing. Secondly, he must be able to read music by hook or crook. Third, he must have an acceptable voice, but not necessarily a solo voice.

"However, we were fortunate in having some outstanding soloists, drawn from local churches. We have one here today—Erv Scherdt. I listened to him on the radio this morning. He sounded as beautiful as ever.

"The key word in our chorus was 'blend,' that we should sound like one voice.

"We had a closely knit membership, including fathers and sons. We have a father and son here today. Irv and Larry Brown. At one time, we had three generations represented.

"I was fortunate to be coached by a gentleman in his 90s who at time time participated in a group that gave operettas. He was Jay Taylor, who at one time lived in what you might call a historical house on Pontiac Road.

"The wives and future wives of Lyra members handled and planned many important and necessary jobs associated with concerts. They acted sometimes as critics, ushered, and made costumes for some of our productions.

"The late Mrs. Pauline Kempf played a very important part in her day. It was through her, and for the most part—gratis, that many of our present-day members can be thankful for the many hours she spent with her vocal instructions.

"She did much to cultivate a voice and make singing a pleasure, rather than an effort.

"Even though the little house of music on Division Street has been silenced, it stands as a reminder to us how grateful we are that there were once people living there by the name of Kempf.

"We would like to recognize them with our rendition of *Salutation* or *Hail, Friends of Music*, [which they did].

[In spite of efforts to keep the chorus together, it dwindled down to about a half dozen and disbanded in 1968.]

"We used to have a social hour down at Metzger's Restaurant after practice. Wilhelm Metzger would serve a gang of 20 or 30 of us whatever he had left from the day. We'd serenade the help and students that came in. It was just a delightful affair."

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When WCHS Vice President Esther Warzynski presented a small check to Mr. Gray, as is customary, Mr. Gray , in turn, presented it to the Bentley Library Conservation Fund. (Lyra Chorus member James Craven is a book conservator at the Bentley where the meeting was held.)

## Historical Happenings

**Chelsea Historical Society:** second Monday, 7:30 p.m. , at the restored railroad depot off North Main at the tracks.

**Dexter Society:** Thursday, April 6, 8 p.m., at the museum, 3443 Inverness. Catherine Mcclung, Dexter wildlife artist, will present the program.

**Manchester Society:** third Monday, 7:30 p.m., at the Blacksmith Shop, 324 East Main.

**Milan Society:** third Wednesday, 7:30 p.m., at the Hack House, 775 County Street.

**Pittsfield Society:** first Sunday, 2 p.m., at Pittsfield Township Hall, State and Ellsworth Roads.

**Salem Society:** fourth Thursday, 7:30 p.m., at the Salem Jaycee Hall, Six Mile Road between Chubb and Napier. The Society is preparing to publish a history of Brookville/Lapham's Corners.

**Webster Society:** Monday, April 10, 7:45 p.m., at 4580 Farrell Road, Dexter (Cottonwood Farm). Patricia Russell of Chelsea will talk about "Plants of Yesteryear for Today's Gardner."

On Monday, May 8, 7:45 p.m., at their home, 2886 West Joy Road in Ann Arbor, Marilyn and Dale Larson will give a program on "Life in a Small Town."

**Ypsilanti Society:** the museum, 220 North Huron, is open Friday-Sunday, 2-4 p.m

**Washtenaw Impressions**
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## Washtenaw County Historical Society

will hold its regular monthly meeting

**Sunday, April 16, 1989**
**at 2 p.m.**

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**Ann Arbor, Michigan**

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